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Gentlemen and My Dear Brothers

II

“It is in Jesus Christ, by Jesus Christ, and for Jesus Christ you must be united. The Spirit of Jesus Christ is a spirit of peace and union; how could you win souls to Jesus Christ if you were not united to one another and to Him?” Again, this expression of the Christocentrism of St. Vincent de Paul germinated in the soul of Fr. Slattery, and then found expression in his writings. This second excerpt from his Circular Letters, written in 1968, prior to the General Assembly of that year, urges us to view the Vatican Council and the Community in Jesus Christ (Ed. note).

As the Council has said so well, the renewal and adaptation of the life of a Congregation demands both a *continual* recourse to the sources of a totally christian life and the original inspiration of the Founder, and also the adaptation of the Community to the new conditions of existence. This directive idea the Council spells out in five general principles which, if we faithfully follow them, will not lead us to superficial changes and “makeshifts,” but to a real renovation under the impulse of the Holy Spirit and under the guidance of the Church.

The first three directive norms show us the sources from which the renewal will unceasingly find its sustenance. I will summarize them in these few words: to follow Christ in the manner proposed in the Gospel; to

remain faithful to the primitive charism of the Society; always to act in an ecclesial perspective. As for the last two principles, they are very precious instructions which tend to enhance the value of the first three. One calls for a better understanding of the present-day condition of mankind and a more authentic vision of the needs of the Church, the better to make clear the extent of its mission in the world of today. The other principle insists on the primacy of the spiritual in a serious renewal.

First of all, it is a question of "following Christ according to the teaching of the Gospel;" and the decree "Perfectae Caritatis" makes clear that this counsel "should be retained by all the Institutes as their supreme rule." This first criterion of renewal is fully justified if one notes that in the Gospels Our Lord is seen multiplying His appeals to follow Him: "Come, follow Me," He tells His first disciples. And He has others than His apostles listen to an analogous appeal. Read in the gospel of St. Luke the scene of the rich young man: "But one thing is lacking to you, Jesus said to him: Go, sell what you have and give it to the poor; then come and follow Me."

And the entire preaching of Jesus has something that bears upon an appeal to follow Him: "If anyone loves Me, let him follow Me." "If anyone wills to come after Me, let him deny himself."

To be sure, the following in the way of Christ is a movement of the entire Church; all of the people of God share in it by the baptismal promises, renewed each year at Easter-time. However, the consecrated life is more manifestly organized to this end. It has as its ultimate norm the following of Christ, to seek only Him and to be entirely His. Its rules and constitutions tend to a better realization of the ideal which Jesus gives us by His example, by His counsels and by His maxims. And, by bringing together into a community those who have

learned to say: "Lord, I will follow You withersoever You go," this consecrated life of ours has as its purpose to be, among the faithful, an impressive example capable of drawing souls to conform their life better to that of Jesus.

If, then, we wholeheartedly follow the "supreme rule" of our renewal, if we truly live with Jesus, for Him alone, and according to His teaching, we will thereby become leaders of souls, animators of the christian life, "signs" by which the world will recognize the true countenance of Christ. And through this witness our vocation itself will take upon itself its true missionary sense.

Our example alone will let christians see that "to follow Christ" presupposes that one love nothing so much as Him, and that one must leave all, like the Apostles, to follow in His footsteps. By our manner of living, acting, and even praying, souls will the better learn that to "follow Christ" is to attach ourselves to Him, to enter on His way, to adhere to His person and doctrine, to conform our life to His, our intentions to His, to wish constantly that, of all the feelings of our heart, our love for Christ be the most firm, the most powerful and the most devoted: a love that dominates our spirit and unifies our activity.

Without any doubt, this "following of Christ" is the best means of effecting a renewal of christian life in the world, just as it is the sovereign way of attaining sanctity, by helping us to fashion in ourselves, each according to his capabilities, the ideal exemplar of perfection, Jesus. "We will never reach the limit in sounding the depths of the mystery of His person," said Paul VI last year. "We will never finish listening to Him as Master, imitating Him as Example, loving Him as Savior; we will never reach an end in discovering His actuality and importance for all the great questions of our time." Indeed, Christ is of yesterday and of today. He does not change with the times. He has the words of eternal life. Forever will He

remain our only Master: "Magister vester unus est, Christus."

The Council, then, has good reason for proposing to us as the ultimate norm for our life attachment to Our Lord and His Doctrine.

Did not our blessed Father, St. Vincent, speak the same language when he told us: "We must hold it as an inviolable rule to judge everything as Our Lord judged it; but I say 'always and in everything.' I must adjust my thoughts and my conduct to His maxims and examples. Let us keep to that, let us walk in that path with assurance Heaven and earth will pass away, but His words will not pass away."

What he thus recommended, our Holy Founder faithfully put into practice. Someone has written: "The master that St. Vincent is, himself has a Master, who is Jesus Christ. In fact, if we are to believe the testimony of his very first companion, Father Portail, the particular and principal virtue of M. Vincent was in truth the imitation of Our Lord. He had Our Lord ever before his eyes in order to conform himself to Him. He was his book and the mirror wherein he viewed himself in every circumstance. And, when there was any doubt about the way to do something so as to be perfectly acceptable to God, he would at once consider the manner in which Our Lord had acted in a similar circumstance or even what He had said about it."

Bishop Abelly does not speak any differently when he gives us the keystone of the spiritual life of his hero: "M. Vincent," he writes, "had proposed Jesus Christ, our Divine Savior, as the unique exemplar of his life. And so deeply had he impressed His figure on his mind and so perfectly did he possess His maxims, that he seemed to speak, to think and to act only in imitation of Him and in accord with His conduct Therein lay his whole moral

and political actionIt was the principle and foundation upon which he relied solely.

Let us admit that these words strikingly recall those of the Decree on the Consecrated Life: "Since the ultimate norm of the religious life is to follow Christ according to the teaching of the Gospel, it is to be kept by all the Institutes as their supreme rule."

If we now listen to St. Vincent himself speaking on this subject, his own words will tell us even more. Manifold and certain are the advantages he discerns in this "following of Christ." It dispels our doubts in our undertakings, and guarantees their success. It arouses our apostolic zeal and, above all, sanctifies it.

"He who speaks of the teaching of Jesus Christ speaks of an immovable rock. He speaks of eternal truths which are infallibly followed by their effects, so that heaven itself would fall rather than that the teaching of Christ come to naught." "Be assured that the maxims of Jesus Christ and the example of His life do not lead us astray; they bring forth their fruit in due time. Whatever is not in conformity with them is vain, and everything will turn out badly for one who acts according to contrary maxims. Such is my belief and my experience."

To stir up apostolic zeal in the heart of priests, he said further: "Let us regard the Son of Man. Oh, what a heart of charity, what a flame of love! Gentlemen, if we had a little of that love, would we remain with folded arms? No indeed! Charity cannot remain idle. It impels us to the salvation and the consolation of others."

But the most important motive that St. Vincent sees in the imitation of Christ is that He is the perfect exemplar of all holiness. Is He not holiness itself, the Light that came into this world to enlighten every man? Our blessed Father will write in this sense to Guillaume Desdames: "You will find in Jesus all the virtues; and if you let Him act, He will

exercise them in you and through you.” Speaking with regard to superiors, he likewise said: “Our Lord should be our model, in whatever position we hold; those who govern should note how He governed, and should be guided by Him.”

What we have just said, it would be well to stress, proves that the views of St. Vincent on this capital point have retained all their actuality. And it would be to respect his thought fully to be inspired in our effort of renewal particularly by the maxims and example of Our Lord.

But this unity with the evangelical ideal would not of itself suffice to express in a precise and complete manner the aspect proper to our Congregation. And that is why the Decree “*Perfectae Caritatis*” cites, in the second place, as the basis of serious renewal, fidelity to everything that constitutes the spiritual patrimony of each Institute. Let us understand it well: it means an active and vigilant fidelity, in no wise rigidly fixed; and which seeks, in the present needs of the Church and the world, in the works that we undertake to respond to them, a genuine continuity with the proper spirit of our Founder. It means fidelity in the circumstances of the present day and in the Church of today.

It is from this point of view that we should consider the heritage handed on by the Congregation; it is from this point of view that we must discern in it what is essential and what is only accidental; what is related to its end and what is only a means.

This reflection on our beginnings is the second principle of our renewal. If it has us look to the past, it is in order to give us an authentic understanding of it, and to allow us to go forward with more assurance and in the right direction. For the true path is indicated by its point of departure; the tree lives by its roots and not by its off-shoots; and it is our most vital roots which we must consider once again,

namely, the pastoral charity, the missionary zeal, and the love of the poor which inspired St. Vincent when he established the Congregation.

Let us note, however, that to remain faithful to the spirit of our blessed Father and to his original inspiration, we must never lose sight of the ecclesial perspective which animated him in all his activities and in all his plans.

The idea would never have occurred to him to establish a Community isolated from the clergy, cut off from the mass of the faithful, turned in upon itself, and setting itself up in the Church as a little world apart, with its own works and its own destiny: "I pray to God every day," he said, "that He annihilate us if we are not useful for His glory."

As a matter of fact, by their origin and their end, our works have always been bound up with the life of the Church. It was for the Church that St. Vincent founded the Mission, in order to evangelize the poor country people, too often neglected; it was for the Church that he also destined some of his priests for the formation of the clergy. Moreover, all the works established by him give evident proof that he always wanted our Congregation to be completely available for the essential needs of the Church and the actual needs of souls. In the ardor of his unabated zeal, he said to his own confreres: "Our vocation is to go throughout the world, and why? To embrace the heart of men The Church is compared to a great harvest that needs laborers; but laborers who toil."

This attention to the needs of souls and this zeal for their salvation did not, however, prevent our blessed Father from waiting until the Church had spoken before he acted. He did not rely on his own personal judgment; on certain points he even modified his attitude at the request of the bishops. For example, by attaching a parish to every seminary taken in charge by his Missionaries. For the wish of the bishops and the decisions of the Church

were for him the expression of the Divine Will.

In our effort at "aggiornamento," we like to consider ourselves, after the example of St. Vincent, as a living part of the Church and as faithful cooperators with the sacred hierarchy. Nor let us lose sight of the fact that our adaptations should be effected in view of the Church and of the general pastoral concerns worked out by the bishops and their immediate collaborators. Is this not what the Decree "Perfectae Caritatis" asks of us when it says: "Let all the Institutes share in the life of the Church. According to their proper vocation, let them make their own its initiatives and intentions, and give preference to them to the degree they are capable."?

Besides the ecclesial aspect which the Decree hopes to see in our renewal, there is opened up a more universal, human dimension: dialogue with the world. It goes without saying, indeed, that our openness to the service of the Church should be accompanied by a constant awareness of its essential needs and by a suitable understanding both of contemporary problems and the human conditions of our time.

As it has been rightly remarked, this fourth principle of renewal sets a new tone. In many Communities separation from the world had been traditionally insisted on from the time of the novitiate. Our Holy Founder, happily, had on this point a more qualified view. Sufficient proof could be given by citing this sentence of our Common Rules: "Engaged, by reason of our Institute, in dealing with people of the world, we will go and see them, however, only by obedience or by necessity." In the same sense, he will tell the Daughters of Charity: "You will have for your monastery the houses of the poor; for your chapel the parish church; for your cloister the streets of the city; for enclosure obedience, having to go only to the sick or to the places necessary for service to them."

Imitating on this point also the conduct of Jesus in His own time, St. Vincent could not better stress his intention of placing our activity in the world, and of keeping us in constant contact with it. His attitude in this respect is for us an entirely new motive for resolutely entering in dialogue with the world, for promoting in our Provinces a proper understanding of the problems and aspirations of our contemporaries, in order to discover the concrete needs of our missionary activity and to utilize for this activity whatever there is of good in the progress and orientation of today's world.

It is self-evident that, in order to bear the desired fruit and to correspond to the wishes of the Church, this acquisition of knowledge should be methodical and judicious. It cannot authorize the reading of everything or of trying everything. Its real purpose is to allow us "to discern the special characteristics of the world of today in the light of faith." It is a question of knowledge enlightened by faith, guided by it, and "ordered to the salvation of the world."

Let us remember, moreover, that this concern for information on the needs of the Church and the conditions of the world must not let us forget the primary importance and indispensable role of personal spiritual renewal in this work of *aggiornamento*.

As in every task of improvement and adaptation, a hierarchy of values is imposed in serious renewal. A few external and superficial modifications would not be enough. The end aimed at is the revitalizing, the rejuvenating of each institute according to the authentic teachings of the Council. This presupposes an activity in depth, not only of the Institutes themselves, but of each one of their members. In revising our Statutes and Constitutions, the extraordinary Assembly will only propose the premises, the principles from which our

Congregation will derive its strength for renewal. But the renewal itself will be the outcome of the efforts of each one to invigorate his consecrated life in fidelity to the Gospel, to his own vocation, and to the spirit of St. Vincent.

That is why the Decree for Religious wisely warns us that without this interior renewal all *aggiornamento* is destined to become ineffectual: "Since the purpose of the religious life is primarily to help the members follow Christ and be united to God through the profession of the evangelical counsels . . . the best adjustments made in accordance with the needs of our age will be ineffectual unless they are animated by a renewal of spirit. This must take precedence over even the active ministry."

Here again, let us note, the Conciliar decree has its counterpart in the teachings of St. Vincent. Let it suffice to recall the throbbing words he spoke to his missionaries in his magnificent conference on "seeking the kingdom of God:"

To seek implies care, implies action. Seek God in yourself, for St. Augustine asserts that when he sought God outside himself, he did not find Him. Seek Him in your soul The interior life is necessary; one must aim for that. If that is lacking, everything is lacking After the word 'seek' comes the word 'first', that is to say, seek the kingdom of God before anything else"

But why this primacy given by the Council to interior renewal? Because on it depends all the rest. The correctness of that statement did not escape any of the Conciliar Fathers. One of them even asserted: "If this Council is not a Council for holiness, we have wasted our time." Let us not deceive ourselves: it is not we who will bring to our "up-dating" the desired success; it is God. Our *aggiornamento* must be achieved under the constant influence of His grace, grace which we must beg for and

merit without ceasing. Let us not lose sight of the fact that every change, however great it may be, implies at one and the same time a transformation and something that remains the same. It presupposes that there is an evolution and a progress in order to be more itself. That is what one calls "maturing." Now it is God who causes the maturing just as He causes growth. Cardinal Gracias, Archbishop of Bombay, recalled in this regard recently the profound statement of Newman: "The Church changes in order to remain itself." Could not the same be said of our Congregation in this post-conciliar era?

Today we admire the beautiful cathedrals of the past: majestic symbols of the labor of our ancestors, where we continue their prayers and can admire their talents; anonymous works also, in which no one sought his own glory, but the glory of God alone; finally, works of a collectivity, the fruit of the group toil of thousands of men, a manifest sign of the fraternal union among all. But why can we still contemplate, in our own day, those incomparable cathedrals, and make use of them? Why have they kept all their freshness, all their charm, all their reason for existing? Because we have known how to restore them, rejuvenate them and repair them, piece by piece, stone by stone, by adapting and replacing what was needed in consequence of new requirements or the wearing away by time.

Thus will it be for our dear Congregation, if we, under the impulse of the Holy Spirit and in the light of the Council, know how to remain faithful to the broad outlines of our common vocation; to replace what is really out-dated in our Statutes and Constitutions; to add to them elements which will enrich them; and finally, to promote new works which are deemed opportune and properly Vincentian. Thus, retaining its own proper aspect, while drawing upon new powers in the great laws of

renewal of the consecrated life, our Congregation will, as in the past, remain a magnificent instrument at the service of the Church, of the Poor, and of the Clergy. And, according to the promise made to St. Catherine Labouré, God will continue to make use of it to reanimate the Faith in the world.

